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ABSTRACT

This study examined the ratings by special education teachers of a series of 34 potentially irritating behaviors exhibited by school building administrators. A sample of 94 special education teachers employed in 19 school systems was asked to rate the 5 most irritating behaviors of these administrators. The five most irritating behaviors were: (1) shows favoritism, (2) is inconsistent in making decisions, (3) forgets what it's like to be in the classroom, (4) is more interested in the appearance of the program than its quality, and (5) handles discipline problems poorly. A sixth response, "rarely or never compliments me," was also very frequently selected. The survey itself is attached. (Contains 21 references.) (Author/DB)

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Irritating Behaviors of School Building Administrators as Perceived by Special Education Teachers

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Running Head: IRRITATING BEHAVIORS

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Abstract

This study examined the ratings by special education teachers of a series of 34 potentially irritating behaviors exhibited by school building administrators. A sample of 94 special education teachers were asked to rate the five most irritating behaviors of these administrators. A 100% response rate was obtained. The five most irritating behaviors were: shows favoritism, is inconsistent in making decisions, forgets what it's like to be in the classroom, is more interested in the appearance of our program rather than its quality, and handles discipline problems poorly. A sixth response, rarely or never complements me, was in a virtual tie with the fifth item. .

Irritating Behaviors of School Building Administrators as Perceived by Special Education Teachers

An often expressed complaint by special education teachers is that school building administrators frequently exhibit a series of irritating behaviors that may have negative effects on morale and the delivery of services to exceptional children. The majority of studies of regular educators conclude that teacher burnout is related to lack of administrative support, recognition, and effective communication with staff (Cook, 1983; Moracco, Danford, & D'Arienzo, 1982). Most of the studies excluded special education teachers.

In one of the few studies in the area of special education attrition, the survey of Billingsley and Cross (1991) indicated that one of the reasons that special education teachers left the field was that administrators were not sufficiently sensitive to their needs. These authors concluded that school administrators need to create more favorable teaching conditions as one step necessary to reduce the attrition

rate of special education teachers. Similar findings have been reported by Lawrenson & McKinnon (1982). These authors reviewed factors related to attrition and burnout in special education teachers (behavior disorders). They indicated that "hassles with administrators" was the major reason for leaving the job. Factors related to staying on the job included a greater amount of administrative and staff support, as well as recognition of teacher effort by school administrators. Lawrenson & McKinnon compared the responses of a group of behavior disorders teachers who were still employed with those who resigned. Of 20 teachers who remained employed, supervisory "recognition for a job well done" was uniformly given as a source of satisfaction. None of the teachers who resigned selected that statement.

Another factor found to be related to teacher's job dissatisfaction is administrative approaches that prevent empowerment within school settings. Recent literature has stressed the importance of empowerment as a significant factor contributing to more effective teaching and job satisfaction (Bolin, 1989; Carnegie Forum on Education, 1986; Darling-Hammond, 1986; Kaus,

1974; Reitzug, 1991; Rowan, Raudenbush, & Kang, 1991). However, there remain clear-cut obstacles to achieving a greater degree of empowerment by teachers. Authoritarian administrative style is cited as a frequent factor reducing teacher empowerment and, by implication, lowering teacher morale (Conley, Schmidle, & Shedd, 1988). One effect of feeling powerless is indicated by the findings of a survey of 311 urban and suburban teachers (Benson & Malone, 1987). These results suggest that there is a significant relationship between feelings of powerlessness and work alientation. Other factors leading to diminished empowerment include lack of performance feedback, absence of collegial assistance, and restrictions placed upon teacher's role in instructional decisions (Benson & Malone, 1987). We maintain that feelings of impotence and job frustration by special education teachers is reflected in the perceived irritations they express toward school building administrators.

The purpose of this study is to examine teachers' ratings of potentially irritating administrator's behaviors. We will then make suggestions on ways of

reducing the most frequently cited irritating behaviors. It is our position that this will enhance the effectiveness of special education teachers and reduce possible feelings of disenfranchisement as well as the tendency to leave the field.

Method

The authors have been involved in the use of rating scales to assess patterns of irritating behaviors in various educational populations (Dangel, Walker, & Sloop, 1991; Kaufman, Dangel, & Walker (1992). The rating scale used in this study was developed based upon these earlier studies . A large pool of potentially irritating behaviors was distilled to 34 items based upon the opinions of a group of teachers who were asked to indicate, anonymously, building administrative behaviors that irritated them. The order in which the items appear in the scale was randomly assigned. Table 1 presents the 34 potentially irritating items.

Insert Table 1 about here

The survey forms were distributed to special education teachers who were enrolled in graduate-level courses in education at a large urban university. A total of 94 teachers currently employed in 19 different school systems participated. One hundred percent of those asked, completed the questionnaire. A total of 84% were special education teachers employed in public school settings, and the remaining 16% were in private schools. Fifty four percent taught at the pre-school or elementary level, and the remainder of the sample taught at either middle or high school. More than 75% of the teachers had taught for two or more years. Most of the sample were females (89%). A total of 59% of the respondents taught at schools with 500 or more students; whereas 41% taught at schools with fewer than 500 students. The sample was 87% Caucasian, 12% African American, and 1% Asian.

Respondents were asked to select the five most irritating statements of the 34 presented. They were assured of anonymity and were asked to express their true feelings about day to day relationships with school building administrators.

Results and Discussion

In general, the results are consistent with studies indicating dissatisfaction with the way some building administrator's interact with teachers (Benson & Malone, 1987; Hallinger & Richardson, 1988; Lawrenson & McKinnon, 1982). The five items selected by the entire sample as most irritating were: "shows favoritism", "is inconsistent in making decisions", "forgets what it's like to be in the classroom", "is more interested in the appearance of our program rather than its quality", and "handles discipline problems poorly." A sixth response, " rarely or never complements me", was in a virtual tie with the fifth item. The response, "is inconsistent in making decisions," is congruent with the findings of Lawrenson & McKinnon (1982). These authors used structured follow-up interviews to determine why teachers of behavior disordered students stayed on the job or resigned. Those who resigned stated that they were most concerned with their immediate supervisor who listened to their expressed needs and "...then failed to follow up or give any subsequent feedback regarding their requests",i.e., to be inconsistent. Since the role of

building administrators includes day to day decision making, it is important for them to be conscious of the importance of consistency in providing feedback to teachers. Furthermore, school building administrators need to be concerned about other frequently expressed irritations by special education teachers if they wish to enhance job satisfaction and reduce the attrition rate. One of the items chosen, "rarely or never complements me" strongly suggests the need for more building administrators to be aware of the need for positive recognition of teachers for achievements on the job. Recognition and positive reinforcement has been demonstrated to be basic to teacher morale and constructive interpersonal relationships in school settings(Benson & Malone, 1987; Billingsley & Cross, 1991; Kaus, 1974, p. 28).

Selection of the statement, "forgets what it's like to be in the classroom," is also similar to Billingsley & Cross' (1991) statement "lack of understanding/ appreciation for the work of others." This suggests that many administrators have detached themselves from the problems and realities of teacher-pupil interactions.

We don't wish to leave the reader with the impression that burnout and resignation are totally due to unsatisfactory teacher-administrator interactions. Clearly, there are other factors that determine such decisions. However, there is mounting evidence to indicate the importance of the teacher-administrator relationship in terms of improving job satisfaction and reducing teacher attrition and burnout.

The demographic variables were assessed using a test of differences between two proportions (Walpole, 1992). Using the .05 level of significance, several demographic related differences in the results were found. The following results met the above mentioned criterion. The item, "shows favoritism", was selected by 40.5% of the public school respondents, while it was chosen by only one private school respondent (7.7%) . Teachers from schools having more than 500 students selected the favoritism item more frequently (43%) than those from schools having fewer than 500 students (24%). In most school settings, special education teachers are in the minority. It has been reported that some building administrators have limited knowledge of the

role of special educators (Valesky & Hirth, 1992). To the extent that these administrators view special education practices as being alien to them, they will tend to feel less comfortable with these teachers and exclude them from the majority group. This implies that special education teachers may be perceived by some administrators as members of the "out group" (Marques, Yzerbyt, Leyens, & Jacques, 1988; Mummendey & Simon, 1989).

The item, "forgets what it's like to be in a classroom," differentiated between teachers from large versus small schools (41% for large vs. 20% for small schools). It is likely that administrators in smaller school settings generally can have more contact with their faculty, and may visit classrooms more often. This provides the perception that the administrator understands the "real world" of the classroom environment. None of the other six most selected items related to demographic sub-groups reached significance.

There have been many authors who have been critical of existing interaction patterns of school administrators . The survey report of Billingsley & Cross (1991) concludes that the education bureaucracy needs to

make teaching of exceptional children more attractive and satisfying. They suggest providing more favorable teaching conditions such as adequate support systems, less paperwork, and presence of adequate resources for teaching. Skrtic, quoted by Thousand (1990), suggests that the professional bureaucracy operating schools is sometimes "non-adaptable". Skritic recommends an alternative structure to replace the present bureaucratic administration. He uses the term, "adhocracy" to describe his alternative structure. Skritic's adhocracy is a more flexible arrangement for teaching, where a group of teachers and related professionals provide collective skills and knowledge to develop more effective individualized programming for students. He infers that such an arrangement is more effective and would provide more professional satisfaction for the teacher. Such a system would give teachers a greater degree of support within the adhocracy, thus enhancing teacher empowerment (Thousand, 1990). As mainstreaming and inclusion of exceptional children increases, conditions which enhance positive relationships between building administrators and

special education teachers takes on greater importance.

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Table 1

Irritating Behavior Survey

My administrator:

1. Is inflexible; goes strictly "by the book."
2. Always seems rushed and makes me feel as though I'm wasting his/her time.
3. Treats me condescendingly and makes me feel inferior or incompetent.
4. Steals my ideas and claims them as his/her own.
5. Makes impractical suggestions.
6. Frequently lies; says something and denies it later.
7. Acts as if she/he "knows it all."
8. Often procrastinates on problems saying "We'll have to think about it," and never follows through.
9. "Passes the buck" on problems saying that they are out of his/her hands.
10. Rarely or never compliments me on a job I think I've done well.
11. Seems distant and aloof.
12. Doesn't support me in parent conferences.
13. Makes unwanted physical contact or sexually suggestive remarks.
14. Shows favoritism.
15. Refuses to provide necessary materials even when

they are available.

16. Often asks <u>others</u> how things are going in <u>my classroom</u>.

17. Comes into my room and interrupts my class.

18. Withholds information about many important school matters.

19. Talks about others when they aren't present.

20. Is a "nit picker" and focuses on unimportant details.

21. Dresses inappropriately.

22. Always "jumps on the band wagon" of current fads and insists everyone "join the parade."

23. Is inconsistent in making decisions.

24. Assigns too much unnecessary paperwork.

25. Criticizes the way i handle problems without possessing adequate information to do so.

26. Handles discipline problems poorly.

27. Has unrealistic expectations about my job performance.

28. Never takes anything seriously.

29. Is not a good leader.

30. Is more interested in the appearance of our program rather than its quality.

31. Forgets what it's like to be in the classroom.

32. Always wants to do things <u>his/her</u> way.

33. Doesn't listen.

34. Has no sense of humor.